

A REAL SUICIDE CLUB OF WOMEN IN NEW YORK.



DRAWING THE FATAL BALLOT

To The Editor of the *New York Journal*

This is the true story of the suicide club. I have told it of my own free will, because I have experienced a change of heart and now no longer believe in the objects of the club.

Minnie Eckles

The Suicide Club and Its Victims.

The Journal presents herewith the story of the Suicide Club. It is told by one of its members. Anything more extraordinary has never been heard of in real life. It is so incredible that it would hardly be believed were it not that so many provable facts exist.

These facts show that thirteen women of the street, who made Third Avenue and the Bowery their headquarters, deliberately handed themselves together, under a compact of death. They bound themselves to meet twice a month, on the 13th and 27th, and to draw lots to decide which one of the members should kill herself within thirteen days of the date of meeting.

Minnie Eckles, who tells the story, is one of the eleven girls who remain of the original thirteen that formed the club. The other two have paid their club dues—death.

For weeks there have been rumors in New York that such an organization existed. That it centered about the Florence Mission for Fallen Women, in Bleeker street, was known. The names of several of its members were known. That it had already scored two victims was known. At the Florence Mission there has been talk of little else this month, or since the suicide of Mamie Donohue, the last victim, who took carbolic acid on August 31 and died within a few hours.

The police have tried to get some of the girls to divulge the meeting place of the club. They met with silent resistance. The most dreadful oath, according to the girl who now reveals the facts, was prescribed to insure secrecy.

Minnie Eckles explains why she no longer considers the oath binding. She is living quietly in a private family at Ocean Grove. The people who have given her a home know all about her history and believe thoroughly that she has reformed. Under a new name, she will try to redeem her past life.

News like that spreads very fast with us. That day all of us went to the mission. They had taken Ida away to the hospital, where she died. Afterward they brought her body back to the mission. It was put in a handsome coffin in the chapel, and there was a funeral such as any one might be proud of. They said all sorts of nice things about poor Ida, who looked, as we thought, very lovely in her coffin, in which a lot of flowers had been put.

They took her away in a hearse to the mission plot. After she was gone, we girls began to talk of the difference between the funeral Ida had had, and the sort of funeral they give them at the hospital where so many of us had gone for good. I don't know who it was that first suggested that we do as Ida had done. We were standing, perhaps half a dozen of us in front of the mission.

As I remember it, there were, besides myself, Jennie Beck, Frankie Moore, Mamie Kelly, Mamie Russell, Mamie Donohue and Stella Martin. We didn't feel very cheerful, as you may imagine. Funerals always make the girls realize how wicked they are and how they must some day give an accounting of themselves. Even when they haven't any religion, the girls feel that there is something they don't know about, and death makes them pretty serious.

But, somehow, we seemed gradually to lose sight of the terror of death, in speaking of Ida. We thought, instead, of the pretty funeral. "That's the way I want to go when my time comes," I said.

"Well," announced some one, "there's only one way to make sure that you will go that way."

"How?"

"Do as Ida did."

We couldn't get away from the idea after that. We scattered, but that evening when we met in Italian Jack's place east of the Bowery, where most of us hung out, we began to talk about Ida and her suicide, and about nothing else much. Mamie Russell took a lead in the talk, and finally she suggested that we all agree to do as Ida had done.

"Altogether?" I asked. I was pretty badly scared.

"No," said Mamie, "one at a time. We will go over to my room and draw lots, and the one who gets the prize will do as Ida did, take carbolic acid. And I hope it is I," she added.

Most of us were afraid, and I almost shook at the idea. But Mamie, who had been drinking, as usual, talked as if she was possessed.

"What have we got to live for?" she said. "Why should we be afraid to die? Nobody cares for us. Decent people won't have anything to do with us. It is either do as Ida did, or else go away somewhere and work like a nigger. I prefer to do as Ida did. We all know it feels good to get full. Well, carbolic acid will simply make us feel that way. We won't know anything."

Italian Jack wasn't a nice place. Even when I went there, I knew that that night it seemed particularly dark and evil. Somehow Mamie convinced us that anything would be better than to have to come night after



SUICIDE No. II

Mamie Donohue, who got the fatal skull and crossbones at the second meeting of the Suicide Club, and who killed herself with carbolic acid on West Fourteenth Street, August 31.

Mamie Russell, who drew the first ballot of death at the meeting of the Suicide Club, and killed herself in her room at 97 West Houston Street, on August 9th.

By Martin Van Norman, of the Florence Crittenton Mission.

Several of the girls who come here have told me of the Suicide Club. I was horrified when I heard of it, and tried to learn something of the meeting place and other details. But my informants always stopped short there. They said they were bound to secrecy and could not under any circumstances say anything except that the club existed and that it held regular meetings. Even this the girls only divulged after hard pumping. I could not understand, until this knowledge came to my ears, how such a sudden epidemic of suicides should have broken out. Jennie Beck, who acknowledged belonging to the club, told me that it was formed by women who have learned that there was nothing in the life they were leading, and who yet lacked the courage to change this life for an honest existence in which they must work hard. They preferred death. At first, when the news of this dreadful club came to my ears I could not credit it, but I learned afterward of so many things that seemed to corroborate the statements made to me that I became convinced.

Two days after the death of Mamie Donohue I was taken ill. I lived at 93 West Houston street in such rooms as girls of our class have.

Some one called in a doctor. He said I was suffering from a nervous shock and that I would have to go to the hospital. I had been to the hospital before and envied poor Mamie. And yet there was a great honor in her. I was afraid to do as she had done.

So I sent word to a lady who had been kind to me, and asked her to help me. I said to her I was ready to reform, and I hope I may stick to my word. I am happy now for the first time since—since I first went wrong. I was taken out into the country and in a few days I was almost well.

I tell the story of the Suicide Club with the full permission of my protectress. In fact, it is practically at her request that I go into it. She thinks that a full knowledge of the facts will do more than anything to break up the club in case the girls, who remain should attempt to continue it. I hardly think, though, that my confession is necessary to insure its breaking up. Most of the girls were as badly scared as I was. A few like Jennie Beck and Stella Martin, who didn't admit it if they were frightened, grew less anxious to commit suicide after they learned that the mission people would not furnish a funeral with flowers and a grave in the mission plot. That was one of the things that helped to make suicide attractive to us—the funeral. Ida Cuff and Mamie Russell both had beautiful funerals, while other girls who waited until they were dead in the hospital or poorhouse were put away in Potter's Field.

It was Ida Cuff who really started the club. I hear it was her death started it. She lived at the Florence Mission. She was a comparative stranger here. None of us girls knew her very well. She kept to herself. They told me she had come from the West somewhere in search of the man who had promised to marry her. She didn't find him, and after awhile drifted into the mission. But she never was really one of us.

Some time in the latter part of July, I think it was the 26th, she committed suicide. She killed herself at the mission by drinking carbolic acid. Of course, we learned about the case almost as soon as it hap-

By G. W. Reid, Superintendent Florence Crittenton Mission.

In order to check these suicides, the managers of the Florence Crittenton Mission have decided to stop the practice of burying the victims from the mission and in the mission plot. A formal order to this effect has been drawn up and promulgated. All the women among whom we work have been given notice of this decision. I think the order will have a beneficial effect. It takes away some of the attraction that death seems to have for these unfortunates when they know they are going to be buried in Potter's Field, without services or flowers or tears, instead of having what they consider a "fine" funeral. Nothing else will probably serve so well to stop the suicides. We have, I think, by this order, accomplished more than would have been possible by any amount of argument and reasoning. To talk these poor women were simply deaf. They insisted that it was easier to die than to reform and work and lead a decent life. Mamie O'Donohue's case decided us in taking some active steps for putting an end to the terrible practice of self-destruction.

thing seemed like an awful dream.

"Let's begin," I heard Stella Martin say.

"Hold on a minute," put in Mamie Russell. "First, we will take an oath to do as we agree and keep quiet."

"What will we say?"

"You repeat after me: 'I swear, so help me God Almighty, that I will kill myself with carbolic acid if I draw the skull. I will come to the meetings twice a month as long as I live, and will not say a word to anybody outside about this.'"

Stella Martin repeated the oath. Then some one else repeated it.

Finally, it got round to me. I was so nervous I couldn't talk distinctly.

"Don't be a coward," urged Mamie, "say it after me." And so I said it, but as I hope to live I didn't know what I said. It was only afterward that the words came back to me. Mamie Russell wrote them out so that we could repeat them at every meeting, she said.

"Now, then, go on," Stella Martin said, when Mamie had finished.

"No, not yet. We've got to take another oath. Let's all repeat it together."

"What will we say?"

"Hold up your right hand," Mamie ordered. We all held them up.

"Now, she went on, say after me: 'May God Almighty shrivel up my bones and paralyze me and make me blind if I break my oath. So help me God.'"

I know, I repeated that and I am pretty sure all the others did. We seemed to be under a spell.

"Now we'll draw lots," said Mamie. "Who will draw first?"

No one spoke. No one moved. Mamie herself finally said:

"I see you are all still afraid, so I will start." She put her hand into the hat where she had thrown the ballots. To this day I think she knew just where the skull was and that she picked it out deliberately. Of